

# What is Zen?

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ZEN IS A school of Buddhism that developed in China a little over a thousand years ago. It came to Japan about 700 years ago, where it has been flourishing ever since. As you know, Buddhism is based on the Buddha's personal experience which he had about 2500 years ago in northern India, after six years of search. This experience came to him while he was sitting under the Bodhi tree by the River Nairanjana. Buddhism started from that experience, and all the schools of Buddhism, no matter how varied their forms, sprang from this. Some Buddhist schools base their doctrines on the teachings which Buddha developed after his enlightenment. But Zen in particular insists that one must have the same experience the Buddha had, ignoring as unnecessary all the teachings of the written and oral tradition that have been handed down over 2500 years. This too is based on the Buddha's teaching. His instructions to his disciples were: "Do not believe what I tell you just because I am older or wiser than you; do not believe because of all these conditions. You must experience what I tell you, and according to that, your own personal judgment, take what I tell you as true or not." The main point is he never instructed his disciples to take what he told them as gospel truth, without questioning its truth through personal introspection and study. Zen has followed this instruction most strictly and persistently ever since its development in China.

When Zen was flourishing in China, Zen followers obeyed rather blindly the injunction "not to rely on words or letters." They altogether ignored the sutras which record the Buddha's teachings, they never performed religious ceremonies; they just went around relying on their own

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experience. In fact they went to such extents to ignore the traditional ways of following a religious teaching that they were often despised as heretics by their fellow Buddhists. Further, because they valued and relied on their individual experience, they even ignored the teacher who led them to that experience. There are many instances recorded in the annals of Zen in which a teacher brings his disciple to have the same experience as the Buddha, and yet when he asks his disciple what he had, he is struck by his disciple. Such incidents are often found in the history of Zen, and they give us a picture of what a rough, tough religion Zen is. And such things take place today in Japanese Zen monasteries.

As Zen does not rely on written or oral tradition, but on personal experience, Zen teachers do not give any lengthy sermons; their sermons are usually very curt and epigrammatic. Once a teacher asked his new disciple, "You have been under the late master and now you are here. You must have had a great deal of training under him. Let me see what your personal experience is." This new disciple didn't know what to answer. Thinking he would quote some passages from his late master's sermons, which he had jotted down, he went over his notebooks in search of some suitable statements in response to his new teacher's request. He quoted one passage after another, which in turn his new teacher rejected, saying, "That is your late master's statement, not your own. I'd like to have your own." The disciple didn't know what to do, so finally he asked his new teacher: "I am at my wits' end. Would you tell me the real teaching of the Buddha (that is, what is the ultimate reality)?" The master then said: "I'd be willing to explain it to you if I could, but Zen is something that can never be told by another person. What I tell you is my own: that will never be yours. What you need is your own, something that comes out of your own inner being. If it is not that, what's the use of listening to others and remembering all those words?"

Words do not serve you when you need them most. For instance, when you are at the moment of death or suffering from some mortal wound, you cannot just open up your notebooks and see what passages are the most appropriate to meet this crisis. You can never do that. You have to meet the situation in your own way. And that comes out of yourself, never from another's mind or teachings.

The young man was quite disappointed. "Well," he thought to himself, "though I've been under my late master, my new teacher doesn't seem to be willing to tell me anything about Zen. Perhaps I am not so

developed yet. I ought to devote myself to something else, some pious work maybe, rather than try to master Zen." So thinking he abandoned the attempt to have his own experience, burned all his notebooks, and quit every attempt to realize Zen. He secluded himself and devoted himself to taking care of his late master's tomb. (In China and Japan, it is regarded as a pious deed to take care of the tomb of one's teacher. It is akin to a Christian looking after the tombs of the Christian saints.)

As far as he was concerned, he had abandoned all efforts to have his own experience and never thought of himself as undergoing any Zen discipline. Or so his conscious mind told him. His unconscious life, however, was working along quite different lines. One day he was sweeping around the tomb and a stone, made fly by his broom, hit one of the bamboos growing nearby. When the stone struck the bamboo, it made a sound. That sound awakened something from the depths of his unconsciousness that, engaging his consciousness, made his mind open to all the secrets of Zen (if there were any such secrets in Zen).

A certain little incident happens to awaken that sense, however unconscious or deeply buried it might be. What is this sense, what awakens, what is the content of this awakening? This is what Zen tries to awaken in us, that sense of self, that self we think we know. "I" is the first pronoun we use on every occasion, even in dialogues with ourselves. But when any of us is asked, "What is the I?" "What is the self?" I don't think there are many of us who can answer that question satisfactorily.

We try to answer, in a way, by saying, "I am I," but *what is that I which makes you say "I am I"*—what is that? Who is he or she? When that question is pursued, it will make all of us think anew about the meaning of I.

What reality, being, or person does it stand for? It is said that when Moses received the commandments from God to communicate to the Israelite people, Moses asked Him, "Who shall I say it was who wished me to transmit this message?" Then God said, "I am that I am." This, I understand, is not exactly what the original Hebrew says, but that does not matter. Ever since that translation has circulated among the Christian people, God's name had been known as "I am that I am." Now, in the case of God, it might be all right, but it is not so in ours. God may say, "I am that I am," but if we say it, another question is forthcoming: "What is that 'I'?"

Zen masters would put that question in a more concrete and intimate

way. They would ask, "What is the I when we are dead?" The custom is not so common in the West, but in the East, especially in India, the dead are cremated and the body reduced to ashes. The ashes that remain are scattered everywhere or buried. The Zen master asks, "What is your so-called 'I', then? Let me see and interview that 'I' which you have after your ashes have been scattered around and dispersed in the wind." This is the kind of question a Zen master will demand of anyone who comes to him to ask "What is the 'I'?" "What is the self?" or, what amounts to the same thing, "What is reality?" What is the absolute being after all phenomenal existence has been swept away?

We are living on the planet Earth, for instance. Earth has been in existence for many years and ought to exist for many more. But the time will surely come when the Earth will be annihilated and reduced to a nebulous existence. When the world, the whole system of galaxies, turns into a certain gaseous mass, where is the "I" which we are so proud of and whose identity we are so anxious to preserve? As far as our senses go, as far as our intellectualization is concerned, we think much of this I, saying, "When such things take place, when this world comes to an end, perhaps it will evolve into another system." After this system collapses, another system may very likely arise, as far as our intellectually informed knowledge goes. But then, where is the "I"? We may say it is no use talking about such things that might take place after the "I," but it's another thing if it takes place when we are living now. But the strange thing is that this question is not concerned with the far distant future, the future that may materialize after many millions of billions of light years. It may be referred to such a distant future, but at the same time the import of that question is the matter of this present existence, right *now*. That is what Zen demands, and thus, a Zen question always focuses around the "I."

Sometimes the question may come up this way. Instead of after death, or after so many uncountable or immeasurable years, it may concern the past. This time Zen masters will demand: "Present me with what is—not was—your face even prior to your parents' giving birth to you " That is, where is "you" even before what you call "you" was born? From the logical point of view, from the common sense point of view, no question is more illogical or irrational than that. Before I was born, I was not anywhere, we might say. But the question is: Where are you? Where is your face (or sometimes they say nose) even before you were born? This

is most illogical and absurd, and cannot be resolved by any use of the intellect. It comes to the same matter whether the question turns on so many years after or so many years before, because, in Zen, time has no meaning whatever. Therefore, although God is said to have created the world so many thousands of years ago according to the Biblical account, one Christian theologian says that the time when God created the world is not so many years ago; it is right here, just like yesterday. So many thousands of years are supposed to have passed since the Creation—that is not so far away, he says, it was just yesterday. But I would say, it is right now, or just a moment ago. So time is ignored. In the same way, we talk about Judgment Day as something coming many years from now. But according to this way of counting time, Judgment Day is right here. The Creation Day and the Judgment Day are the same and take place in this very moment. The Creation Day is not a fact of the past, but is taking place continuously, even now; Judgment Day, likewise, is going on now, even at this very moment. So the time elapsed has nothing to do with the question, nor has the future anything to do with it. From the Zen point of view, then, where are you even before you were born? In fact, you are never born, therefore, you never die—that is the Zen position.

Now when I think of this "I," this self, somehow I think of the Protestant father Luther. I read recently Santayana's speech on Spinoza, in which he quotes from Christian history. Luther was asked, "Where will you be after you have been ousted from the Church?" because he had protested against the religious policy of the Catholic Church. Luther said, "I stand under the sky." Santayana remarks that Luther was being humorous. To see humor there is something, but he goes on to say that Luther's sky is still clouded, whereas Spinoza's sky is clear. But still he has a "sky." This makes me think of what the Buddha uttered when he came out of his mother's body: "Above the heavens, below the heavens, I alone am the most honored person." Ordinarily speaking, or biologically speaking, he may be said to be a baby that has just come out of his mother's body. But in this case it is difficult to call him a "baby" because a human chronology does not apply; in a Zen sense, he is just there from out of nowhere. When that "strange, mythical being," so to speak, utters, "Above the heavens, below the heavens, I alone am the most honored person," he stands all alone: no heavens above, no earth below—he is just there. Relatively speaking, we think he is in mid-air, but, here, there is no "air" to speak of. Compared to Luther and Spinoza, this Buddha

has nothing over his head, so it doesn't matter whether the sky is cloudy or blue; he has no earth where he can stand, but it doesn't make any difference—he is just there.

A similar episode occurred in China. A disciple came to his master and asked, "What is the most wonderful event, the most miraculous thing that has ever happened?" The Master said, in effect, "I sit all alone on Mt. Fuji. This is the most remarkable thing in the world." Sometimes Zen is said to be dealing with abstractions, but I do not know whether that is true or not. Strictly speaking, what is abstract? what is concrete? Depending on your point of view, what most people think is abstract is not abstract, and what most people think is concrete is not concrete at all. What is concrete is abstract, and what they think is abstract is concrete. Therefore, when a Zen master asks, "What is 'I'?" or "Who are you?" in that case, "you" and "I" are something abstract. But the Zen master wants in concrete terms what all those abstract pronouns like "you" and "I" stand for; the Zen answer must be most concrete, though I, he, she, or you are abstract pronouns. So when this master says, "I sit on Mt. Fuji," that is the most concrete answer.

Now all this talk about the self reminds me of another incident that took place in China. A young man approached a master and the master asked him: "What is it that thus approaches me?" The young pupil failed to answer the question. It took him one year to answer it. The master asked the same question, and the pupil said: "If I said it is or it is not, it misses the mark." So this "I" is nothing that can be predicated: neither "I am" nor "I am not" can be applied to reality itself. To answer this question you may think is not worth eight years or 20 years or 50 years of your life, but this is the question that concerns us the most. To answer it sincerely, a person should not grudge 10, 20 or 50 years to do it; it is a question most important to answer, so in that respect it is right that the price asked be very dear. When you have the world and have lost your soul, the world is not worthwhile at all. We may lose all our wealth, possession, and power, but if we lose our soul, what is the use of living? Even committing suicide is of no use until you have answered this question.

By way of concession I'll give you another example. When we read history, even recent history, the strange thing is that when something "moves" in history, that something unknown moves us all. When the time is ripe a certain period will be rich in certain forms of spiritual phenomena; when it passes, there will remain a dearth in spiritual experiences. About

250 years ago, in the central part of Japan, there came a great Zen master named Hakuin. In his day a great many people attained the experience the Buddha had in India. One day, he gave this sermon: "We Buddhists talk about the Pure Land of Amida where we are supposed to go after our birth and attain enlightenment. But this Land of Amida is not far away in any specific direction: it is right here. Not only is it right here, but this room itself, where we are gathered, is the Pure Land. Amida Buddha is supposed to preside over the Pure Land; this Amida is ourselves, this person is Amida." A lady with religious inclinations was listening to Hakuin's sermon. After she returned home, she thought to herself, "If Hakuin is right, then it is not so very difficult. This myself, this humble person, I can be Amida himself." So she devoted herself to solving that question: This humble being is herself Amida. After a short time passed, she was most devotedly giving herself over to solving the problem. One day she was polishing a pan, and suddenly she had a certain experience that made her realize she was Amida herself; the whole world turned into the Pure Land, shining in the most glorious way. She couldn't contain herself and so she ran to Hakuin and told him, "I have turned into Amida and the whole world is shining like the Pure Land." Hakuin listened to her and kept quiet for a while. Then he said, "Here is a pile of dung. Is it shining? Does it emit any light? Do any beams of light come out?" Then this lady, just coming out of her experience, gave Hakuin a slap in the face and said: "Don't you know? Haven't you realized that?" You can see how deep and vivid her experience was. Ordinary courtesy and civil conduct were ignored altogether. Giving little heed to Hakuin's being an old and respected teacher, she struck him and challenged him with the question: "Have you not had this experience yet?"

There is another case of a young girl, about 16 years old. In those days, girls married young, so she thought to herself, "I am not so bad looking. I must get a desirable husband." So she devoted herself to reciting the Kannon Sutra. According to that sutra, if one devotedly thinks of Kannon, one will get what one desires. So that is what instigated her to read that sutra devotedly. I don't know how many days passed, but one day her father found her in her room sitting on the sutra—something like stepping on the Bible. Her father was astounded by this, so he went to Hakuin to ask him about his daughter's impious act. Hakuin said, "Wait a moment, and I will give you a poem for her. Put it where she will find it and read it." The poem read:

*She who hears a crow even before it cries,  
Longs for her parents even before she was born.*

He told her father to hang it somewhere where she would find it, and to tell him what reaction she had. Her father did so. Surely enough she found the poem, and she told her father, "This is Hakuin's writing. If he knows what this means, then he knows something"—this was the young girl's remark in regard to an enlightened Zen master who was known for his virtue and learning. Her father reported this to Hakuin, whose curiosity was aroused. He asked her father if he could see the young girl to see what she had understood. When she was brought to Hakuin, he tested her in a Zen way. Everything proceeded satisfactorily, but since there was something she did not understand, she retreated. After a few days, she was able to give a satisfactory answer. Things went on like this for some time, and Hakuin finally declared, "No, not yet." To give her a final test to be sure her understanding of Zen was thorough and final, a certain question was given. A few days later she came back and gave her answer. Hakuin rejected it. But she protested, and a quarrel ensued. She grew uncontrollable, and in the end Hakuin had to use his stick to drive her out. She then thought about the question, and returning a few days later, gave a satisfactory answer. She married a few years later and time passed. One day, when her grandchild died, she was utterly dejected. One of her neighbors said to her: "You were noted for your enlightenment and old master Hakuin recognized that your understanding was quite right. How is it you are just like any other old lady crying over your grandchild's death?" This old lady retorted: "You worldly fellow! You don't understand anything about what Zen is! I lost my grandchild and I weep. This weeping is of more worth than reading sutras or piously praying for the welfare of the child in the afterlife. Weeping bestows so much blessing on that little departed spirit!" So after her enlightenment, she was really no different from any other grandmother.